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ABSTRACT

Feminine sex-role behavior, which includes deferential, nonassertive behavior, may stem from women's low status position and powerlessness. In a study of male and female college students, perceptions of the acceptability of assertive behavior were examined as a function of: (1) sex and status characteristics of assertive speakers; (2) sex of the target of the assertive communication; and (3) sex of the observers. Results tended to support the prediction that appropriate assertive behavior was more negatively evaluated when the speaker was female, had low status, and spoke to a male target. Male observers were not more negative than female observers in their views; female observers were more extreme than male observers in their rating of high-status women and judged speakers, regardless of sex, to be more inappropriate. The findings suggest that assertive women were generally perceived more negatively than assertive men. (Author/JAC)

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Influence of Sex and Status Variables on Perceptions of Assertiveness

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Influence of Sex and Status Variables on

Perceptions of Assertiveness

The value of assertive behavior and how to increase assertiveness, particularly women's assertiveness, are topics that have captured much attention during the past decade (cf. Alberti & Emmons, 1970; Bloom, Coburn & Pearlman, 1975; Butler, Note 1). The study I'm presenting here today arose out of a series of questions not unrelated to concerns about the expression of assertion, but rather different from the prevailing focus. That is, I wondered about reactions to assertive behavior. For example, questions like "does the sex of the person who's behaving assertively influence how that person and that person's behavior is perceived?" intrigued me. Let me provide some background information for the study.

Assertion may be defined as the expression of one's legitimate rights (Alberti & Emmons, 1970; Feshbach, 1970). Aggression can be conceptually distinguished from assertion in that aggression is used to describe intentional, hostile behavior, or behavior deliberately injurious to others (Feshbach, 1964, 1970). The distinction between these two concepts in important in this study.

The expression of both assertion and aggression appears to be sex and sex-role related. Generally, sex-role stereotypes condone passive, nonassertive behavior for women, and active, assertive behavior for men (Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Frieze & Ramsey, 1976; Ruble & Ruble, 1980). Sex differences in aggression and assertion are well-documented and tend to fit this pattern (Bardwick,

1971; Feshbach, 1970; Haas, 1979; Kimble, Yoshikawa, & Zehr, 1981; Oetzel, 1966; Tyler, 1965). Among the theoretical analyses offered to explain the existence and prevasiveness of sex-role stereotypes is the "politics of caste" (Hochschild, 1973; Rossi, 1964). This model postulates that sex-role behavior derives from differential socialization of men and women, and these differences in treatment are linked to sex differences in status and power. Women as a group may comprise an inferior caste, subordinant to men. Asymetrical relationships between the sexes may reflect differential access to resources valued in this society, e.g., income and occupational status.

Thus, feminine sex-role behavior, which includes deferential, nonassertive behavior, may stem from women's low status position and powerlessness relative to men. Status differences between men and women may underlie sex differences in behavior and, more specifically, may contribute to observed sex differences in assertiveness (cf. Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Lockheed & Hall, 1976).

The present study examined the perception of assertion as a function of sex and status variables. If the acceptability of an assertive act is status and sex-role related, then the same act of assertion will be viewed differently depending upon the circumstances under which it occurs. In this study, the sex and status of the assertive speaker, and the sex of the target of the assertive communication (that is, the person being spoken to), were predicted to influence how the assertive communication would be evaluated. Furthermore, the sex of the observers

of the interaction was also expected to influence how the assertive person was viewed. Appropriate assertive behavior was predicted to be exaggerated and more negatively evaluated when the speaker was 1) female, 2) low status, or 3) speaking to a male target. Male observers were predicted to be more negative in their evaluations of female speakers compared to female observers.

Procedure and Design

The study was conducted with 168 male and 145 female undergraduate students from an urban university serving as observers. Small mixed-sex groups of these students read a brief instructional passage indicating the speaker's status (high status = advanced graduate student; low status = undergraduate student). Also, the passage referred to the target of the communication by name, thereby revealing the target's sex. Observers then viewed one of four videotaped sequences, two depicting female and two depicting male speakers . The videotapes portrayed a telephone conversation between the male or female assertive speaker and an undergraduate student. Thus, both the status of the speaker and the sex of the target manipulations depended solely upon instruction, and were varied within the experimental group session.

The total design compared perceptions of a videotaped episode as a function of two levels of each of four variables: sex of speaker (male vs. female) x status of speaker (high vs. low) x sex of target (male vs. female) x sex of observer (male vs. female). These are all between-subject variables; each subject received one particular combination of conditions.

After viewing the videotape, the observers rated the speaker and the speaker's behavior on a 31-item rating scale. Eight categories of interest were identified and rating scale items were developed on the basis of logical deduction to reflect these categories. The categories requested perceptions of the speaker's degree of assertiveness, aggressiveness, inappropriateness, psychological maladjustment, distress, likeability, sexual appeal, and the speaker's perceived responsibility for eliciting the target's behavior. Following data collection, the internal consistency of the categories was verified via coefficient alpha (Cronbach, 1951).

Results and Conclusions

The rating scale data were analyzed using a between-subjects analysis of variance with the factors being sex of speaker, status of speaker, sex of target, and sex of observer. Each of the eight categories measured by the rating scale was analyzed. I'm reporting here a selected portion of the results from the analyses combining data from the two speakers of the same sex.

As predicted, assertive women were generally perceived more negatively than assertive men. Female speakers were viewed as significantly more aggressive and more assertive than male speakers. Upon closer inspection, I discovered the exaggerated (i.e., more assertive) perception of women's assertiveness was quite specific and had an unexpected source. Figure 1 depicts these results. An interaction of sex of speaker x status of speaker x sex of observer emerged on the assertiveness dimension, as well as the main effect of sex of speaker. Further

analyses of this interaction revealed that a single cell, that produced by women observers' ratings of high-status women speakers, was primarily responsible for the extreme ratings of women's assertiveness. While the women observers were not directly negative in their response to the high-status woman, they regarded her behavior in a singularly exaggerated fashion.

Summarizing these findings, the sex of the speaker does influence perceptions of a speaker's assertive behavior, specifically along dimensions of assertion and aggression. Observers of both sexes view women speakers as more aggressive than equally assertive men. Women (but not men) observers perceive high-status (but not low-status) women speakers as extremely assertive. This latter result is consistent with data reported by Denmark (1980) who found female subjects more negative in evaluations of a woman professor's assertiveness compared to male subjects. Thus, the high-status woman, for whom assertiveness is, no doubt, often necessary and appropriate, elicits considerable social censure when she behaves assertively. Censure is meted out by virtue of her gender from both sexes, and by virtue of her status from women.

Contrary to prediction, male observers did not respond more negatively than female observers to the assertive women speakers. Rather, as mentioned, results tend to suggest women observers are more critical of assertiveness. The unexpected behavior of the women subjects is perhaps further illuminated by the finding that women rated the assertive behavior as more inappropriate compared to male observers, regardless of the speaker's sex. The women observers

behave as if cast in the role of guardians of gentility and feminine sex-role standards. They are overt in their disapproval of assertiveness in both sexes and overreact to the high-status woman's display of assertion. While this reaction on the part of women observers contradicts prediction and recent data suggesting that women are more generous in their judgments of their own sex, relative to men judges (Haan & Livson, 1973; Lewittes, Moselle, & Simmons, Ncte 2), it is consistent with earlier work suggesting women tend to be more critical of both sexes relative to men (Carter, 1948; Eisenman, 1970; Summerskill, 1953). It is possible that the judgmental stance conveyed by the women observers in this study reflects an internalization of rigid, constrictive behavioral norms dictated by the female sex role.

The sex of the target of the communication also influenced perceptions of the speaker. Speakers addressing male targets were perceived as more distressed than speakers addressing female targets. Depicted in Figure 2, a significant sex of speaker x sex of target interaction further clarifies the target effect. Women presumed to be communicating with males were perceived as more distressed than speakers in all other speaker-target combinations, while female speakers believed to be addressing females were perceived as the least distressed speakers. Thus, the sex of the recipient of the assertive message primarily influenced perceptions of the female, rather than male, speakers. Behaving assertively toward males is assumed by all viewers to reflect considerable emotional distress in the women speakers. Apparently, when a woman presumes to behave assertively toward a man observers

must account for her unorthodox behavior, and do so by inferring she is acutely upset. A woman behaving assertively toward another woman, however, appears to be behaving more predictably and acceptably in the eyes of the observers.

Overall, the status of speaker variable did not produce results parallel to the sex of speaker variable as had been predicted. Within the context of this experiment, gender of the speaker had a more profound influence upon observers' reactions than did speaker's status. While the original prediction that sex and status would similarly influence perceptions of assertiveness in this paradigm may have been incorrect, it seems more likely the status manipulation (undergraduate student vs. advanced graduate student), while powerful enough to affect judgments of high-status women, was not sufficiently strong to produce main effects of status.

In conclusion, the acceptability of assertiveness is very conditional. If you are female, or worse, a high-status female, be prepared! Your appropriate assertive behavior is likely to provoke inappropriate social censure.

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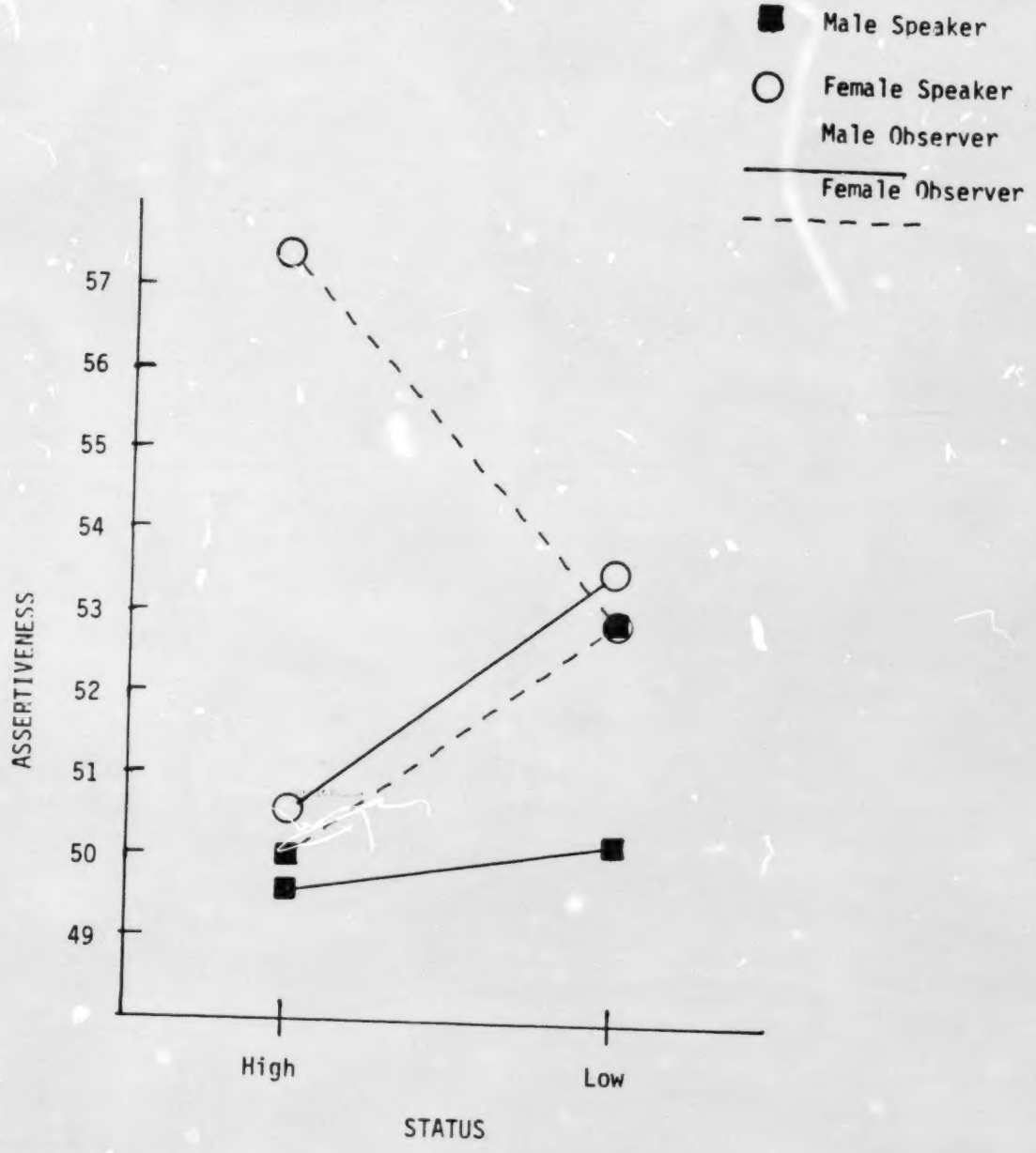
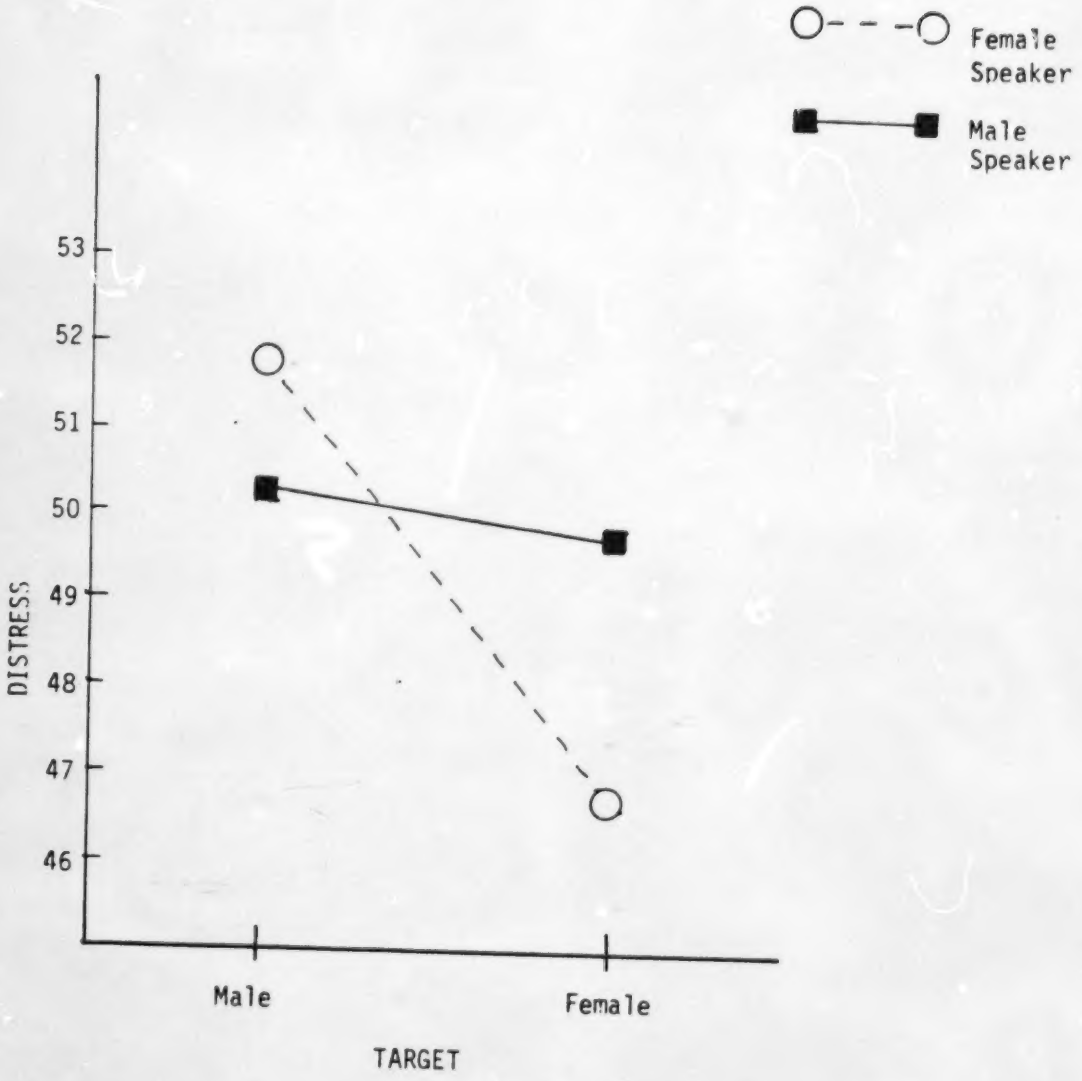
Figure Captions

Figure 1. Mean ratings for assertiveness category as a function of the sex and status of the speaker, and the sex of the observer.

Figure 2. Mean ratings of items reflecting degree of speaker's distress as a function of the sex of the speaker and the sex of the target.


Male Speaker
Female Speaker
Male Observer
Female Observer
57
56
55
54
53
52
51
50
49
ASSERTIVENESS
High
Low
STATUS


Female Speaker
Male Speaker
53
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51
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48
47
46
DISTRESS
Male
Female
TARGET